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NSC FOR MARCHESE/DORAN/ABRAMS

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SUBJECT: GHASSAN SALAME: LEBANON'S POLITICAL SYSTEM IS
BROKEN

CLASSIFIED BY: POLITICAL MINISTER-COUNSELOR JOSIAH ROSENBLATT,
REASONS

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1.4 (B) AND (D).

11. (C) SUMMARY: FORMER LEBANESE CULTURE MINISTER GHASSAN SALAME SHARED WITH US ON FEBRUARY 14 A BLEAK ASSESSMENT OF LEBANON'S POLITICAL SITUATION. SALAME SAID LEBANON'S POLITICAL SYSTEM WAS BROKEN, THAT BOTH SIDES WERE LOSING IN THE CURRENT CRISIS, THAT SYRIA WAS THE ROOT OF THE PROBLEM, AND THAT WHILE NEITHER IRAN NOR HIZBALLAH WANTED VIOLENCE AT THE MOMENT, THEY WOULD ACCEPT VIOLENCE BEFORE BREAKING RANKS WITH DAMASCUS. SALAME STRESSED THAT THE IRANIAN LEADERSHIP CONSULTS HIZBALLAH'S SHEIKH HASSAN NASRALLAH ON ALL ARAB QUESTIONS, NOT JUST THOSE INVOLVING LEBANON. (NOTE: WE DEFER TO OUR COLLEAGUES AT EMBASSIES BEIRUT AND DAMASCUS TO JUDGE THE ACCURACY OF SALAME'S ANALYSIS, WHICH WE SIMPLY CONVEY HERE GIVEN SALAME'S STANDING AS A FORMER MINISTER WHO REMAINS AN INFORMED OBSERVER OF THE LEBANON SCENE.) END SUMMARY.

THE SYSTEM IS BROKEN

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12. (C) OVER LUNCH ON FEBRUARY 14 AT HIS PARISIAN RESIDENCE, GHASSAN SALAME (FORMER LEBANESE MINISTER OF CULTURE) TOLD POLOFF THAT LEBANON'S FUNDAMENTAL PROBLEM WAS A BROKEN POLITICAL SYSTEM. "IT'S BROKEN, ARCHAIC, CORRUPT, CONFESSIONAL, AND STUCK IN THE 19TH CENTURY -- IT PRODUCES NOTHING BUT CRISES," REMARKED SALAME, WHO SAID HE LEFT LEBANON IN 2003 AFTER REALIZING THAT BOTH HIS POLITICAL ALLIES AND ENEMIES WERE HOPELESSLY WEDDED TO THE SYSTEM NONETHELESS.

13. (C) SALAME SUMMED UP LEBANON'S CURRENT POLITICAL CRISIS BY SAYING: "BOTH SIDES ARE LOSING, OR RATHER, THE OPPOSITION IS LOSING AND THE GOVERNMENT ISN'T WINNING." HE SAW NO HOPE OF A NEAR-TERM SOLUTION, AND SAW PARLIAMENTARY SPEAKER NABIH BERRI AND ARAB LEAGUE SYG AMR MOUSSA AS EQUALLY INEFFECTUAL, SAYING THE TWO HAD "NO CARROTS, AND NO STICKS."

THE PROBLEM IS SYRIA

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14. (C) THE PROBLEM, SALAME CONTINUED, IS THAT SYRIA IS BLOCKING ANY MOVEMENT TOWARDS A SETTLEMENT. THE ASAD REGIME MISPLAYED ITS CARDS IN THE AFTERMATH OF RAFIK HARIRI'S ASSASSINATION, AND IS NOW PAYING FOR ITS MISTAKES BY TRYING TO SPIKE THE CREATION OF THE SPECIAL TRIBUNAL AT ANY COST -- ALTHOUGH IT TRIES TO MASK ITS INTENT BEHIND SEEMINGLY UNRELATED DEMANDS SUCH AS EXPANSION OF THE CURRENT CABINET. "I TOLD FOUAD (SINIORA) THAT THE TALK ABOUT CABINET EXPANSION IS ALL B.S., AND HE AGREED," SAID SALAME, WHO INDICATED THAT SYRIA'S ONLY INTEREST IN SEEING THE OPPOSITION ACHIEVE A BLOCKING MINORITY IN THE CABINET WAS SO THAT IT COULD THEN FREEZE THE TRIBUNAL.

THE SPECIAL TRIBUNAL

15. (C) SURPRISINGLY, SALAME ADMITTED THAT HE WAS NEVER AN ADVOCATE OF THE TRIBUNAL (HE HINTED THAT HE WOULD HAVE SUPPORTED A QUICKER, PUNITIVE RESPONSE). HE RECOUNTED HOW, UPON HEARING THE NEWS OF RAFIK HARIRI'S ASSASSINATION TWO

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YEARS AGO, HE IMMEDIATELY RUSHED TO HARIRI'S PARIS HOME WHERE HE FOUND PRESIDENT AND MRS. CHIRAC ALREADY PAYING THEIR RESPECTS TO HARIRI'S WIDOW (INDEED, MRS. CHIRAC WAS UPSTAIRS HELPING MADAME HARIRI PACK FOR HER FLIGHT TO LEBANON AND HER HUSBANDS FUNERAL). "WHAT WILL YOU DO?" SALAME ASKED CHIRAC.

"TWO THINGS. FIRST I'LL CALL FOR AN INTERNATIONAL INVESTIGATION, AND THEN WE WILL SET UP AN INTERNATIONAL TRIBUNAL," CHIRAC REPLIED. SALAME ASKED CHIRAC HOW LONG IT WOULD TAKE TO DO ALL OF THAT. "ABOUT THREE WEEKS," CHIRAC ESTIMATED.

16. (C) "SO HERE WE ARE TWO YEARS LATER WITH NO TRIBUNAL," SAID SALAME, SHAKING HIS HEAD RUEFULLY. NEVERTHELESS, SALAME INSISTED THAT IT IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER THAT THE TRIBUNAL BE ESTABLISHED. "IF WE FAIL AFTER ALL THE TIME, MONEY, AND EFFORT THAT WE HAVE POURED INTO CREATING THE TRIBUNAL, IT WILL BE A SIGNAL TO REPRESSIVE STATES EVERYWHERE THAT THEY CAN RESUME KILLING THEIR OPPONENTS WITH IMPUNITY," SALAME SAID, SUGGESTING ACIDLY THAT EGYPT AND LIBYA WOULD, IN PARTICULAR, WELCOME SUCH A SIGNAL.

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17. (C) ASKED WHETHER HE THOUGHT IT WOULD BE POSSIBLE TO ESTABLISH THE TRIBUNAL UNDER CHAPTER VII, SALAME SAID: "AS A LEBANESE CITIZEN, MY REACTION IS YES, YOU SHOULD TRY IMMEDIATELY. AS SOMEONE WHO KNOWS THE UN, MY PROFESSIONAL ADVICE IS THAT YOU SHOULD NOT EVEN TRY -- IT WON'T WORK." IN

SALAME'S OPINION, THE RUSSIANS WOULD BLOCK ANY ATTEMPT TO

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INVOKE CHAPTER VII.

HOW FAR WILL IRAN/HIZBALLAH GO?

18. (C) SALAME OPINED THAT NEITHER IRAN NOR HIZBALLAH WISHES TO PROVOKE A LEBANESE CIVIL WAR AT THE MOMENT. IRAN RECOGNIZES THAT SUNNI-SHIITE RELATIONS ARE RAW, AND IS ANXIOUS TO PRESERVE SOME DEGREE OF MUSLIM SOLIDARITY AS INSURANCE AGAINST ANY PRE-EMPTIVE U.S. OR ISRAELI ATTACK ON ITS NUCLEAR PROGRAM. BY THE SAME TOKEN, HIZBALLAH LEADER SHEIKH HASSAN NASRALLAH RECOGNIZES THAT HIS POPULARITY (AND HIZBALLAHS) IN THE ARAB WORLD IS EQG AND IS ALREADY FAR LOWER THAN IT WAS IN THE IMMEDIATE AFTERMATH OF THE SUMMER

2006 CONFLICT WITH ISRAEL. SALAME ADDED THAT BOTH IRAN AND HIZBALLAH ARE PREPARED TO BE PATIENT IN PURSUING THEIR LONG-TERM AIM OF REVISING THE TAIF ACCORDS SO AS TO FURTHER STRENGTHEN THE STANDING OF LEBANON'S SHI'A COMMUNITY. (TO ILLUSTRATE, SALAME RECOUNTED A CONVERSATION HE HAD SOME YEARS AGO WITH AYATOLLAH VELAYATI, WHO GAVE SALAME A LONG LECTURE

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ON LEBANESE HISTORY. IN VELAYATI'S DISTORTED VERSION OF EVENTS, THE LEBANESE CIVIL WAR WAS REDUCED TO A CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM CONFLICT IN WHICH THE "GOOD MUSLIMS," I.E. THE SHIITES, TRIUMPHED OVER THE CHRISTIANS, ONLY TO HAVE MOST OF THEIR GAINS STOLEN BY THE "BAD MUSLIMS," I.E. THE SUNNIS, AT TAIF WITH SAUDI CONNIVANCE.)

¶9. (C) THE BOTTOM LINE, SAID SALAME, IS THAT WHILE TEHRAN DOES NOT WANT ARMED CONFLICT IN LEBANON AT THE MOMENT, IT WILL NOT RUPTURE ITS ALLIANCE WITH DAMASCUS IN ORDER TO MAINTAIN PEACE. "THE IRAN-SYRIA AXIS IS THE MOST SUCCESSFUL ALLIANCE TO APPEAR IN THE MIDDLE EAST IN THE PAST 25 YEARS," SAID SALAME.

NASRALLAH'S ROLE TRANSCENDS LEBANON

¶10. (C) TURNING THE CONVERSATION TOWARD HIZBALLAH'S RELATIONSHIP WITH IRAN, SALAME TOOK ISSUE WITH THOSE WHO DESCRIBE HIZBALLAH AS EITHER AN IDIGENOUS LEBANESE MOVEMENT

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OR AS AN IRANIAN INSTRUMENT, SAYING THE ORGANIZATION SHOULD

INSTEAD BE SEEN AS AN INTEGRAL PART OF IRAN. "HIZBALLAH IS THE LEGITIMATE OFFSPRING OF THE ISLAMIC REVOLUTION," SAID SALAMEH, WHO OBSERVED THAT HIS INTERLOCUTORS IN TEHRAN WAX POETIC WHENEVER DISCUSSING NASRALLAH. DESCRIBING NASRALLAH AS "ONE OF THE SMARTEST MEN I'VE EVER MET," SALAME EMPHASIZED ("I KNOW THIS FOR A FACT") THAT NASRALLAH IS AN ACTIVE PARTICIPANT IN THE IRANIAN REGIME'S INTERNAL DISCUSSIONS OF ALL QUESTIONS INVOLVING THE ARAB WORLD. "THEY DON'T JUST CONSULT HIM ON LEBANON, THEY TALK WITH HIM ABOUT EVERYTHING, ESPECIALLY IRAQ. AND HE DOESNT WAIT TO BE CONSULTED, HE ACTIVELY VOLUNTEERS HIS VIEWS," SAID SALAMEH.

¶11. (C) THE IRANIANS, HE CONTINUED, ARE ECSTATIC ABOUT HOW THEIR LONG-TERM INVESTMENT (WHICH SALAME BELIEVES MUST TOTAL TO MORE THAN \$10 BILLION DOLLARS) IN NASRALLAH/HIZBALLAH HAS ALREADY PAID OFF BEYOND THEIR EXPECTATIONS. NASRALLAH'S PRIMARY SUCCESS HAS BEEN IN BUILDING BRIDGES TO ARMED SUNNI GROUPS. "HE WON PALESTINIAN ISLAMIC JIHAD OVER IN THE SPACE OF A FEW WEEKS, THEN HE WENT HEAD TO HEAD WITH THE SAUDIS FOR

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CONTROL OF HAMAS AND HE WON THERE AS WELL. PLUS HE HAS ESTABLISHED TIES WITH SUNNI INSURGENTS IN IRAQ," SAID SALAME, WHO SAW NASRALLAH'S SECONDARY ROLE AS SECURING A SHIITE BRIDGEHEAD IN THE LEVANT IN PREPARATION FOR IRANIAN DOMINATION OF THE REGION.

BERRI: LOST HIS MUSCLE

¶12. (C) SALAME SAID THERE ARE TWO SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT ON PARLIAMENTARY SPEAKER NABIH BERRI. THE FIRST SCHOOL SEES HIM AS A SYRIAN PUPPET, WHEREAS THE SECOND MAINTAINS THAT BERRI SECRETLY DISAGREES WITH MUCH OF THE OPPOSITION'S AGENDA AND

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WOULD BE HELPFUL TO THE MARCH 14 MAJORITY IF HE COULD BE, BUT THAT HE FEARS FOR HIS LIFE. "PERSONALLY, I'VE ALWAYS THOUGHT BERRI WAS JUST A THUG," SAID SALAME. BERRI'S PROBLEM, SALAME CONTINUED, IS THAT HIS MOST LOYAL AMAL SUPPORTERS ARE NO LONGER THE HARDENED MILITANTS THEY ONCE WERE DURING THE LEBANESE CIVIL WAR. THEY HAVE AGED, AND MANY ARE NOW BUSINESSMEN OR BANKERS. "HES LOST HIS MUSCLE," SAID

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SALAMEH, WHO ASSESSED THAT BERRI NOW DERIVES MOST OF HIS
INFLUENCE FROM HIS OFFICIAL POSITION RATHER THAN FROM HIS
POLITICAL BASE. MOREOVER, BERRI'S RELATIONSHIP WITH DAMASCUS
IS TROUBLED. "HE (BERRI) KNOWS THAT BASHAR DOESN'T
PARTICULARLY LIKE HIM, AND EVEN THOUGHT ABOUT HAVING HIM AND
WALID (JUMBLATT) KILLED AT THE SAME TIME HE HAD RAFIK

KILLED," SAID SALAMEH.

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